

The American Economy of War: Georges Bataille's General Economy and Chigurh's Vapid Space in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*

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Evoking the genre of the American Western in its atmosphere of gun-fights and colossal amounts of money, Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* is a novel that grapples with an apparently decaying America. Completely void of sex, the novel's energies are instead aimed at the worship of guns and the chronicling of a violent America. This displacement of desire away from sexual experience and towards a violence centered on firearms is captured in French theorist George Bataille's notion of General Economy. Bataille conceptualized a system where psychic energy grows as it is expended and accumulated until a limit is eventually reached. At this point energy must be expended uselessly through either violence or sex. McCarthy's novel exhibits an America that has reached that limit. To force the useless expenditure to which America is obligated, McCarthy introduces Anton Chigurh: a soulless and ghostly entity who haunts the novel. It is Chigurh's placement as a ward of death and his use of not only guns but the rural objects of an American pastoral, which plagues the text and constructs him as vapid space. By utilizing Bataille's theories and examining the parallels of gun culture and sexual repression in America, we can read McCarthy's novel as a warning against being distracted by the nostalgia for an idealized past and the ongoing violence created by a culture obsessed with guns.

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country* is entirely void of sexual experience yet filled with rifles, handguns, and a disproportionate amount of violence. At the start of the novel is the most blatant and isolated reference to sex, when Moss returns from hunting and sits on the couch beside his young wife, Carla Jean. Moss feels as though Carla Jean is overly talkative, and to threaten her if she is not quiet, he uses sex: "you keep runnin that mouth and I'm going to take you back there and screw you" (22). Here, sex takes on an unspeakable value, as Moss reverses the traditional marital concept of sex where arousal or initiation of sex is typically a positive gesture. Instead, Moss uses sex as a threatening remark. Later, as Moss is on the run with the money he found, he is walking around a corner when a

cab driver “asked him if he wanted to go see the girls and Moss held up his hand for him to see the ring he wore and kept on walking” (85). While Moss threatens his wife with sex as an act of violence, as though it was not only an illicit action but also perilous, he rejects the adulterous offer from the cab driver. There is not only a neglect of sex through *No Country* but a complete void. This is shown again in the dignified and fatherly figure of Sheriff Bell, who also seems removed from any amount of lust, when he discusses being lucky to have met his wife:

People think they generally know what they want but they don't. Sometimes if they're lucky they'll get it anyways. Me I was always lucky. My whole life. . . the day I seen her come out of Kerr's Mercantile and cross the street and she passed me and I tipped my hat to her and got just almost a smile back, that was the luckiest. (91)

Bell's story speaks nothing of sexual desire but instead of simple luck, a certain kind of fate having brought him and his wife together. Moss and Bell both seem to carry a morality that harkens back to a Victorian view of sex where the act is viewed as both immensely fierce yet dangerous if uncovered or openly discussed. This is not to say that both men do not have a warm affection for their wives but that sex is noticeably absent from any of their encounters. Bell manifests the negation of transgressive sex within the novel when Moss is discovered dead at a hotel, and the police inform him that a girl was killed also. Bell responds by stating, “I don't reckon his wife is goin to like that part of it neither” (241). Bell fears mention of the possibility that Moss and the hitchhiking girl had intercourse because it would have been infidelity; however, this is only inferred by the reader, as no direct mention is made to the possibility. Steven Seidman discusses this morality in his text *Embattled Eros*, where he discusses the roots of current American views on sexuality. Seidman states that

many Victorians held that sexuality is an enormously powerful, life-giving and enhancing force that must be expressed. Yet, they were equally convinced that sexual expression automatically elicits lust, which carries serious personal dangers. The Victorians responded to this dilemma by organizing an intimate culture that attempted to control and spiritualize lust or sublimate it to productive social projects. (24)

Seidman goes on to conceptualize those “social projects” as campaigns against masturbation or other forms of sexuality deemed transgressive. Within McCarthy’s text, desire and lust, unable to be discussed outwardly, are displaced onto firearms and violence. While sex is negated, discussions and descriptions of guns are acute and blatant throughout the text.

Wrought with references to various types of firearms, McCarthy’s text reorients desire and violence by reversing the place of sex and guns. In chapter III, Bell discusses how he prefers older guns, stating, “I still like the old Colts .44-40. If that won’t stop him you’d better throw the thing down and take off runnin. I like the older Winchester model 97. I like it that it’s got a hammer. I dont like havin to hunt the safety on a gun” (62). Bell’s remark captures his desire for an ideal past in a nostalgia for a simpler use of firearms. Bell remembers times when some sheriffs did not use guns. What Bell is repressing, however, is the use of these guns in the battles over the Southwest between the American, Mexican, and Natives. Young men in the novel want faster and more powerful guns. In Joan Burbick’s *Gun Show Nation* she picks up where Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* left off and travels around the country visiting various gun shows to examine the connection between the politics of firearms and capitalism. Early on, Burbick remarks on the right to own guns becoming a deeply political issue in the 1960s:

Guns enter our national politics with earnest in the 1960s, when the country was rocked by assassinations, dissent over the vietnam war, and social change from the civil rights movement. Since then the political language of gun rights has only become louder and has found expression in several Second Amendment organizations. (16)

Eventually, Burbick concludes that, in the words of Charles Heston, “democratic struggle became irrelevant to the protection of person and property” (28). Earlier, Burbick also concludes, “the gun does indeed revolve in the American soul” (22). One need not look further than the American media on any given day to see articles on trials over gun violence, recent shootings, followed by proclamations from various organizations like the NRA, who adamantly defend the possession of guns in America. This same obsession with guns, their place, and their use, occurs throughout McCarthy’s novel. Anytime a gun is present in a section of *No Country*, the reader can be assured that there will be a description of what brand and fashion of a gun it is. For example, in the beginning when Moss

finds a dead man sitting under a tree, he is “lying against a rock with a nickelplated government .45 automatic lying cocked in the grass between his legs” (17). Numerous incidents like this occur where a shotgun or a handgun is described. This need to articulate firearms in a phallic manner yet repress any direct mention of sex displays America’s displacement of energies from sex onto guns.

The displacement of desire for sex with the desire for firearms is not so unimaginable when conceptualized through French theorist Georges Bataille’s writing on sex and murder in his text *Death and Sensuality*. Bataille states, at length, that

There is a potential killer in every man; the frequency of senseless massacres throughout history makes that much plain. The desire to kill relates to the taboo on murder in just the way as does the desire for sexual activity to the complex prohibitions limiting it. Sexual activity is only forbidden in certain cases, but then so is murder; it may be more roundly and more generally forbidden than sexual activity, but the taboo, like that on sex, only serves to limit killing in certain specific situations. (72)

Bataille attempts to show how violence and the sexual act are inextricably laced together through the nature of their taboo. The two objects of desire are also related, in that each has an appropriate time. An appropriate time for murder is when an individual is sentenced to death by the state and they become sacrificed for the sake of upholding some form of law. Bell describes the most “unusual day” as the day he saw the execution of a man he had helped to prosecute. Bell states, “most of em I know had never been to a execution before. When it was over they pull this curtain around that gas chamber with him in there settin slumped over and people just got up and filed out. Like out of church or somethin. It just seemed peculiar” (63). Bell’s reference to the execution being like a church service is especially apt when the Christian church is viewed as a whole institution built around the idea of sacrifice. Chigurh, more than Bell, understands the place of sacrifice, as he upholds his word to kill even when there is no longer a valid reason to be doing so. Throughout the novel, Chigurh upholds his set of principles, not for money, but as a religious orthodoxy. The principles Chigurh creates and aligns himself with are what make him at once terrifying and otherworldly.

Chigurh separates himself from others in the novel not only by being a principled killer but by repurposing objects for murder. Raymond Malewitz artfully captures this notion in his article “Anything Can Be an Instrument”: Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*.” Malewitz argues that Chigurh is set apart by appropriating objects for purposes other than their intended use: “the novel’s satanic villain, Anton Chigurh, is if anything more skilled at severing objects from their sanctioned use value. His ubiquitous gas canister and stun gun serve not only as his weapon of choice but also as a universal key” (726). Further, Malewitz notes how, “in what might be the most audacious inversion of use value, Chigurh opens the novel by strangling a police officer with the very handcuffs designed to restrain him” (726). This repurposing of objects defines Chigurh but also makes him especially eerie. Malewitz goes on to note how the “peripheral characters in *No Country for Old Men* not only struggle to understand how an object might be reshaped into a thing; they also comply with the standard notions of use value in their attempts to interpret the aftereffects of misuse” (732). Kenneth Lincoln notes in his book *American Canticles* that Chigurh not only misuses objects but masters the ways in which he uses things: “Chigurh shows the devil’s mastery of weapons of destruction, from slaughter yard tools, to trucks and a transponder the size of a zippo lighter, to rifles and handguns and sawed-off shotguns” (143). Chigurh’s fearsome and almost divine presence is reinforced through his talent to create things that kill and his talent for repairing himself.

Chigurh inhabits a vapid space within the novel created by his knowledge of and willingness to sacrifice life to uphold his principles. After the gunfight outside of the hotel with Moss, Chigurh approaches a man who has been shot. Instead of simply shooting him again to end his life, Chigurh goes about a ritual, turning the scene away from being a murder into being a sacrifice. Chigurh tells the man “don’t look away. I want you to look at me” before shooting him and watching the man’s life end: “Chigurh shot him through the forehead and then stood watching. Watching the capillaries break up in his eyes. The light receding. Watching his own image degrade in the squandered world” (122). Chigurh here is perhaps looking for the thing he does not himself have: a soul. Lydia Cooper discusses Chigurh’s ghost-like presence in the novel and his apparent soullessness in her article “He’s a Psychopathic Killer, but so What?” Cooper states that “according to Bell, a fundamental absence—the absence of a soul—marks the boy he sent to death row, who murdered his girlfriend

for no reason, and also marks Chigurh, who murders at a coin toss" (12). Having no internal soul but only a set of rigid principles that must be followed, Chigurh has forced his decision making outward into his famous coin toss. Lincoln describes how Chigurh's replacement of a soul with his set of principles leads him to believe he takes no responsibility for his actions:

Chigurh stands up to God with an unflinching, uncompromising belief in predetermination~no free will or human choice, no mercy or sentiment, no giving in or letting go or giving up. Principled in the purity of his work, he defies sentiment and falsehood and betrayal. A pure born-again agent of death, anti-Christ Calvinist Chigurh is a man of his deadly word, a relentless avenger, an implacable killer defying God. (144)

A victim of ideology, it is the combination of a Calvinistic, violent, yet principled killer that makes Chigurh such a terrifying yet indefinable entity throughout.

Chigurh and the overall prominence of violence alongside the absence and rejection of sex within McCarthy's text mimics Georges Bataille's conception of economies of energies, which he outlines in the first volume of his seminal work *The Accursed Share*. Bataille's text conceptualizes how energy is accumulated and expended in various ways. The French theorist argues that as humans accumulate energy, an inevitable limit exists. Bataille states that, at this point, "if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically" (21). The catastrophic expenditure Bataille warns of is war: "if we do not have the force to destroy the surplus energy ourselves, it cannot be used, and, like an unbroken animal that cannot be trained, it is this energy that destroys us; it is we who pay the price of the inevitable explosion" (24). Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons further articulates Bataille's concept in her article "Bataille and Baudrillard: From a General Economy to the Transparency of Evil," stating,

When the limits of growth have been reached, the pressure that an inevitable surplus of energy continues to exert leads to a wastage and dilapidation of resources. If this luxurious expenditure is not deliberately channeled, it

may occur in ways that are frightening, if not devastating~the outbreak of war being the most costly of expenditures to which an entire population may be forced to submit. (80-1)

For Bataille, the glorious expenditure of energy is sex without reproduction~the inward lashing out of the emotionally violent sexual act. However, as I have discussed prior, sex is absent from McCarthy's America in the world created by *No Country*. In the America depicted in McCarthy's novel, the nation has moved into a state of decay brought on by the ever more objectifying forces of a society obsessed with money. Bell articulates this at various moments when he reflects back to an idealized past. Bell states how at one time some sheriffs "wouldnt even carry a firearm. A lot of folks find that hard to believe but it's a fact" (63). At the close of that same chapter, Bell states, "it takes very little to govern good people. Very little" (64). Bell is caught up contemplating a past that may not have even existed. As far as human history can tell, humans have always been capable of violence, and individuals will continue to rise up who are "bad" or who need to be dealt with by sheriffs with guns.

On the other side of the past Bell is nostalgic for is Chigurh who often does not carry a gun, but instead his stun gun, normally used for killing cattle. Bell describes Chigurh by stating, "he's a ghost. But he's out there" (249). The term ghost only begins to identify Chigurh; however, it does capture his almost metaphysical place in the novel. Chigurh, unlike Moss or Bell, is aware of the economies that Bataille has described and steps in to reconstitute a sort of order. Chigurh evokes not so much a retribution for an America that has lost itself, but rather, a reorienting of a nation that has become unaware of its own corrupt expenditure of energy. Chigurh displays his hunting and killing as done for the sake of his own principles by returning the money near the end of the novel. He does not only hand the money over to the individual it belongs to but plainly and honestly describes a small loss in cash:

some of it is missing. About a hundred thousand dollars. Part of that was stolen and part of it went to cover my expenses. I've been at some pains to recover your property so I'd prefer not to be addressed as a bearer of bad news here. There is two point three mil in that case. I'm sorry I couldn't recover it all. (251)

Chigurh seems completely separated from any desire for wealth, he appears instead to believe that he is simply placing the pieces where they belong in a narrative thrown off by a drug trade gone bad and a welder and ex-veteran who took advantage of the situation. This obligation to put a chaotic world back in order through violence is seen again in the final scene with Carla Jean, where Moss's wife challenges Chigurh, and an intriguing exchange occurs, beginning with Carla:

You give your word to my husband to kill me?

Yes.

He's dead. My husband is dead.

Yes. But I'm not.

You don't owe nothing to dead people.

Chigurh cocked his head slightly. No? he said.

How can you?

How can you not?

They're dead.

Yes. But my word is not dead. Nothing can change that. (255)

In this scene, the earlier conversation between Carson Wells and Moss is evoked, where Wells, Chigurh's old killing partner, states of Chigurh, "You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (153). John Vanderheide, in his article "Varieties of Renunciation in the Works of Cormac McCarthy" articulates this scene in terms of Chigurh's inability to be vulnerable:

Chigurh of course refuses to give himself over to being given over. As he confesses to Carla Jean, he cannot make himself vulnerable—which simply means that he cannot get over his constitutive vulnerability. So he applies the ascetic ideal to learning how to escape from handcuffs, learning how to read the emotional responses of his enemies in the dilation of their pupils, learning how to treat himself for all sorts of wounds. (72)

Chigurh becomes an entity that forces the expenditure of useless energy in an America that attempts to hoard and stock up its resources. Chigurh is

the embodiment of a nation that has expended catastrophically, through war, instead of gloriously, through sexual experience. Chigurh's placement as a messenger of death, and his removal from a world plagued by guns, is what ultimately sets him apart within McCarthy's text.

By seeing Chigurh and the America he enters through Bataille's General Economy, McCarthy's novel becomes a critique of a nation obsessed with war and gun violence, losing any sense of community. With Moss displaying an obsession for money and a willingness to die for it and Bell embodying an America distracted by obsessing over an idealized past, the principled Chigurh enters as an entity meant to confront an America that has lost track of its own principles. In so doing, Chigurh must inevitably become a void space, shrouded in metaphysical terror. It is the Calvinistic belief in fate and the emotionless willingness with which Chigurh goes about his responsibilities that make him not only a hitman but a dark and eerie entity who haunts even the pages upon which he does not exist.

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